

National Journal: The New Center

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The National Journal

March 8, 2008

The freshman Democratic "majority makers"

are overwhelmingly moderate in National Journal's

2007 congressional vote ratings. They hope their

willingness to buck liberal orthodoxy will help them

keep their seats in 2008.

When freshman Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Fla., learned that his voting

record in 2007 placed him precisely in the center of the House in

National Journal's congressional vote ratings, his initial reaction

was laughter. "I laughed because of the statistical probability," he said. "I was

never a legislator. I was a businessman who gets the facts in the best interests of

my district. I don't get caught up in ideology."

Instead, Mahoney explained, he has focused on the diverse needs of his South

Florida constituents, including strengthening federal protection of homeowners

insurance against hurricanes, developing water-resource projects to clean up the

Everglades, and boosting the development of fuels made from sugarcane. "I got

elected because people in my district weren't happy with the status quo," said

Mahoney, who has been widely described as an "accidental" congressman

because he won the seat of Republican Rep. Mark Foley, who resigned shortly

before the 2006 election after it was disclosed that he had sent sexually explicit

instant messages to congressional pages.

Mahoney said he wasn't familiar with National Journal's vote ratings until he was informed that the results made him the man in the middle of the House's ideological spectrum, with 214 members more conservative than he was, 214 members more liberal than he was, and the rest not receiving scores because of missed votes. His votes for liberal positions on the minimum-wage hike, embryonic-stem-cell research, and Iraq war spending were balanced by his conservative votes on the alternative minimum tax, illegal aliens, and missile defense funds.

Mahoney nevertheless seemed pleased with the outcome. He suggested that he is helping to reshape politics in his bellwether state, which famously split in the 2000 presidential election. "I'm proud as a conservative Democrat to be right in

the middle," he said. "My [campaign] opponents

are conservative Republicans and out of touch

with the district."

Mahoney has plenty of freshman classmates to

keep him company at the center, including Rep.

Nancy Boyda, D-Kan. She said she viewed her moderate

ranking as "third-party validation" of her

nonpartisan approach, which, she emphasized, is

"not based on ideology or beholden to a party."

"Kansans don't get involved in the politics,"

Boyda contended. "They want to know how the issues

affect them." She is so independent that she

has refused to join the House's moderate "Blue

Dog" Democrats and has turned down entreaties

to participate in party programs to promote her

re-election. "I told [House Democratic Caucus

Chairman] Rahm [Emanuel] in no uncertain language

that I didn't care what he thought about

how I should run my campaign," Boyda said. "I

told him to leave me alone, and I won't tell him

how to run [other] campaigns. After three weeks,

he learned to leave me alone."

Boyda's centrism is all the more compelling because

she defeated GOP Rep. Jim Ryun, who was

the No. 1 most conservative House member in

NJ's 2006 vote ratings. Ryun is trying to regain the

seat this year, but he faces a primary challenge

from a more moderate Republican.

These and other freshman Democrats exemplify

the major changes in the House

and Senate following the shift in party

control brought by the 2006 election.

When Republicans held the majorities,

the members at the ideological

center, not surprisingly, tended to

be moderate Republicans who-despite

some grumbling-usually voted

for the agenda set by President Bush

and GOP congressional leaders. In

those days, the smaller corps of moderate

Democrats rarely determined

the outcome on major votes.

Those dynamics changed radically

last year, particularly in the House.

Republicans there displayed intense

cohesion and unity: None of them

ended up in the liberal half of the

chamber in the 2007 vote ratings,

and only Reps. Wayne Gilchrest, RMd.,

and Christopher Shays, RConn.,

ranked outside the 200 most

conservative members. The House's

new center filled disproportionately

with freshman Democrats, particularly those who

won GOP-held seats. They joined more-senior

moderate Democrats-including longtime Blue

Dogs and "New Democrats"-to replace the moderate

Republicans who had occupied the center

under GOP control.

Of the 10 Democrats, including Mahoney, who

hold the slots at the exact center of the House in

the 2007 vote ratings, six are first-termers. More

broadly, National Journal typically classifies members

with average-or "composite"-scores in the

vote ratings between 35 and 65 on a scale of 100 as

"centrists." Nineteen of the 42 House Democratic

freshmen qualify as centrists under those standards,

as do three of the nine Senate Democratic

freshmen. (See chart listing all of the congressional centrists,

pp. 30-31, and charts on the freshman Democrats'

scores, pp. 22-25.)

Among the Senate centrists was freshman Sen.

Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., whose overall rating

made her only two ticks more liberal than Sen.

Mary Landrieu, D-La., at that chamber's ideological

fulcrum. "When you come from a moderate

state, being moderate is as natural as brushing

your teeth," said McCaskill, who ousted GOP Sen.

Jim Talent. "It's the people you represent." Joining

McCaskill among the centrists were freshman

Sens. Jim Webb, D-Va., and Jon Tester, D-Mont.

National Journal has compiled the congressional

vote ratings annually since 1981 under a system

designed by William Schneider, a CNN political

analyst and commentator, and a contributing editor

to the magazine. The ratings are based on key

votes-107 in the House and 99 in the Senate for

2007-that a panel of NJ reporters and editors selected

and classified as relating to economic,

social, or foreign policy.

Computer-assisted calculations ranked lawmakers on how

they voted in each of the three issue areas relative to each other

on a conservative-to-liberal scale in both the Senate and the

House, and assigned percentile scores. The system also assigns

composite scores, which are an average of the members' issuebased

scores. (For listings of the key votes used to calculate the ratings,

and for more details on the methodology, see pp. 40-46.)

The results show, for example, that on foreign-policy issues,

Boyda had a liberal score of 57 and a conservative score of 42.

That means that she was more liberal than 57 percent of other

members, more conservative than 42 percent, and tied with the

rest. The scores do not mean that Boyda voted with the liberals

57 percent of the time, or that she was 57 percent "correct"

from a liberal perspective.

Voting Their Districts

While plotting their 2006 election strategy, the Democratic

campaign committee chiefs, Emanuel and Sen. Charles

Schumer, D-N.Y., made a concerted effort to recruit candidates

who matched their states and districts, even if their policy positions

were not in line with party dogma. Schumer, for example,

supported freshman Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., despite his antiabortion

views, because he thought that Casey could defeat

GOP Sen. Rick Santorum. Similarly, even though Tester and

Webb favor gun rights, heavy support from Schumer's committee

helped put them over the top in the election. Democratic

leaders also crafted a modest, middle-of-the-road agenda-"Six

for '06"-that their party's challengers could embrace, even in

Republican strongholds.

The upshot, of course, was the "majority makers," 30 freshman

Democrats in the House and six in the Senate who won

Republican-held seats. Their victories handed their party control

of Capitol Hill, but the newcomers also gave the Democratic

caucuses a more moderate hue.

"We bring a healthy attitude to the Democratic Party," Webb

said. "People tend to listen to our views." He described many of

the freshmen as "economic populists." Asked to define that

term, he replied, "You measure the health of a society by how

working people are doing, not by what's happening on Wall

Street. There are probably six of us out of the nine [freshmen]

that were elected together that to varying levels feel strongly

about that."

Rep. Jason Altmire, D-Pa., said that the moderate voter ratings

scores for him and other freshmen prove that "we

could, for the first time, field candidates who could be competitive

in these [Republican] districts. These results show

where I want to be: working the middle with both sides." By

contrast, Altmire said, he defeated his predecessor, GOP Rep.

Melissa Hart, in his suburban Pittsburgh district because "she

had moved too far from the center; once her constituents

found that out, they kicked her out." Hart is seeking to regain

the seat this year.

"I'm a conservative Democrat," explained freshman Rep.

Christopher Carney, D-Pa., who represents the northeastern

corner of his state. "And that's where our district is-with family

values, people who attend church, and people like me who

are gun owners, hunters, and fly fishermen." Carney defeated

Republican Rep. Don Sherwood, who faced legal charges that

he had abused a woman who claimed to be his mistress.

The vote ratings "show my independence,"

said freshman Rep. Zack

Space, D-Ohio, who succeeded convicted

GOP Rep. Bob Ney. "The results

don't surprise me. I try very

hard to view my voting obligation as

a reflection of my constituents....

People in my district don't want to

know about liberals and conservatives.

They want actions consistent

with their values."

Freshman Rep. Ciro Rodriguez, DTexas,

previously represented a mostly

urban district centered in San Antonio.

But because of redistricting,

the seat he captured in his 2006

comeback is radically different and

far more conservative, sprawling

more than 600 miles from the San

Antonio suburbs to the outskirts of

El Paso. He now takes more-conservative stances on some issues,

such as immigration and gun control, and his vote ratings

scores have moved toward the center.

"It's a totally different ball game," Rodriguez said. "Although

my basic values haven't changed, what changes is that I am responding

to views of different constituents. I have a better appreciation

of members who represent swing districts and how

the [Democratic] leadership has to deal with those members."

Indeed. As they've settled into their roles on the Hill, the majority

makers (and their leaders) have been painfully aware of

the need to ensure their political viability-particularly in the

House, where the freshmen face re-election already this fall.

They have become prime GOP targets, and their fates will go a

long way in determining whether Democrats retain their House

majority, and by how much.

The freshmen know that every vote they cast could be used

against them on the campaign trail. For the leaders, it's a constant

balancing act: seeking to satisfy and help the moderate

first-termers politically, while not endangering the party agenda

or alienating more-liberal caucus members.

Altmire has not been afraid to disagree with Democratic

leaders. "Early this Congress, they would make clear their unhappiness,"

he said. "Over time, they have decided they can

work without us on some votes, and they are comfortable that

we know what we are doing."

Likewise, Carney said, "I have no hesitation when I vote

against the party view if it conflicts with the values of my district."

Space, when asked whether he talks with other freshmen

before tough votes, replied, "We don't turn to each other on

how to vote but to share information on how we vote," such as

constituency-related data.

A look at the voting patterns of the two most conservative

freshman Democrats-Rep. Joe Donnelly, D-Ind., and Mc-

Caskill-demonstrates how they and their classmates have given

the leaders heartburn. Donnelly sided with conservatives on seven

of the 44 economic votes used in NJ's 2007 vote ratings, including

his vote against expanding the State Children's Health

Insurance Program by raising tobacco taxes; that measure, a

Democratic leadership priority, passed by 21 votes. Donnelly

and five other freshmen were also among the 12 House Democrats

who voted against their party's budget resolution last

March, allowing the leaders only a narrow 216-210 win for advancing

their tax and spending priorities for the coming year.

Immigration and law enforcement votes tilted Donnelly's

record on social issues toward the conservative end of the spectrum.

He voted with most Republicans and against most Democrats

to build additional fencing along the southwest border, a

measure that liberals managed to turn back by a close 200-217

vote. Overall in the social category, he voted with conservatives

23 of 35 times. Similarly, Donnelly voted with conservatives 18

of 28 times on foreign policy, largely on defense matters. He

voted to fund the Iraq war through the first half of 2008, for example,

siding with all but one Republican and with 77 other

Democrats, including 15 other freshman Democrats who replaced

Republicans.

McCaskill was equally willing to go her own way in the Senate.

In the economic category, she voted with conservatives on seven

of the 36 votes included in the 2007 ratings. Like Donnelly, Mc-

Caskill voted against raising taxes to fund the SCHIP expansion.

On social issues, McCaskill also took conservative stances on

immigration, leading her to side with conservatives on 11 of 34

votes. Her vote was decisive on one key matter: She-along

with Webb and Casey-gave President Bush exactly the 60

votes he needed in August to keep intelligence surveillance

powers for six more months, over the objections of most Democrats

and of civil-liberties groups. On the war, McCaskill rejected

liberal efforts to withdraw troops quickly and to cut off

funding. All told, she sided with conservatives on eight of the

29 foreign-policy votes.

Freshman Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., said she thinks

her leaders are sympathetic to the first-termers' occasional

splits with their party. "I'm sure they understand that we need

to keep this district to retain the majority-and that I won't return

unless I vote my constituency," she said.

Giffords predicted that her centrist score in the vote ratings

would have a positive effect at home. She recalled serving in

the Arizona Legislature, when "we rallied around the scoreboard

to see everybody's grades" in interest-group ratings. "My

opponents call me a 'Nancy Pelosi liberal,' " she said. "But the

electorate understands the facts ... and they want us to get the

job done, and on a bipartisan basis."

GOP operatives are skeptical that these Democrats' centrist

voting records will give them much electoral protection. For

many of the freshman Democrats who represent Republican-leaning

districts, "walking the plank for Nancy Pelosi-even if

they don't vote with her 100 percent of the time-still has very

real political consequences," said Ken Spain, a spokesman for

the National Republican Congressional Committee.

"It only takes one or two issues to make an election competitive,

and so far, a large number of freshman Democrats have

provided us with plenty of fodder for the fall," Spain added. In

February, for instance, after House Democrats decided to let

the intelligence surveillance law expire without passing a new

one, the NRCC sent press releases to 20 freshman Democrats'

districts arguing that the lawmakers were "playing political

chicken with American lives and our country's security."

In a session this week with reporters, NRCC Chairman Tom

Cole, R-Okla., said that even if the freshman Democrats have

compiled moderate records, they'll still suffer politically because

of what he described as their party's paltry legislative

achievements. "Most voters will tell you the country is not better

off," Cole said.

Having served three terms before he was defeated in 2004 and

then regained his seat in 2006, freshman Rep. Baron Hill, D-Ind.,

is very familiar with Republican campaign tactics. "I wouldn't expect

them to say anything else," Hill said. "They will say anything in their ads, as I have learned over the years. I don't respond to their ads, other than to respond with my own ads. My theme is that I am a moderate Democrat, as are most of my constituents."

Class Conflicts and Consensus

The freshman Democratic class of 2006 isn't entirely moderate, of course. Those who won blue districts or states tended to have far more-liberal scores in NJ's vote ratings. Take freshman Rep. Yvette Clarke, D-N.Y., who succeeded retired Democratic Rep. Major Owens in a Brooklyn-based district that gave John Kerry 86 percent of its vote in the 2004 presidential election. She was the 33rd-most-liberal House member in 2007. And freshman Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., who ousted moderate

GOP Sen. Lincoln Chafee, was the second-most-liberal senator

last year.

Casey noted that the wide-ranging scores of the nine freshman

Senate Democrats reflect how different their states are-

from reddish Missouri, Montana, and Virginia, to swing states

Ohio and Pennsylvania, to bright blue Rhode Island. "We represent

different states and different constituencies," Casey said.

"There's a lot of diversity in the class."

Such ideological diversity has made it difficult for the class to

find much consensus on policy positions. The single most unifying

issue for the freshman Democrats in both chambers has

been ethics reform, which is not surprising, given that their

party's electoral success resulted in great measure from the

GOP's ethics problems. "We want to have a legacy as a class,"

Altmire told NJ last year. "It won't be on policy grounds, but to

have an identity as agents of change who focus on reforms."

Casey agreed. "Ethics is probably the best example of us not

just agreeing to come together, but having a real unanimous

feeling about it," he said. "I was surprised, frankly, at the camaraderie

in the class. I thought everyone would stay in their own

lanes, lead their own lives legislatively."

McCaskill, a former state auditor, contended, "My theme song

is accountability. My comfort zone is asking questions about the

way the money is being spent." The freshmen are not afraid to

challenge their party's veterans and push tough ethics changes,

she noted. "Some, especially those who came from the House,

are much more diplomatic and much more strategic. And some

of us have a bad habit of picking up a two-by-four."